

# Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church to begin worship services at Opera Memphis

## The Blvd embraces 'multi-site' experience

By Cathryn Stout

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Members of Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church will soon have a second place where they can get "The Blvd" worship experience.

Pastor Dr. Frank Thomas will begin preaching Sunday morning sermons at Opera Memphis on Sept. 27.

The latest congregation to follow the multi-site trend, the church will hold a weekly 8:30 a.m. worship service in East Memphis under the name The Blvd East and a 10 a.m. worship service at its campus at 70 N. Bellevue.

"The Memphis area doesn't look in 2009 the way it looked in 1979 and being multi-site allows us to reach out to another area and still be one congregation," said staff Pastor Janae Pitts, who is orchestrating the launch.

"Our ministry and message are still the same, but it's our method that has to change."

The Blvd joins New Direction Christian Church, Fellowship Memphis and a smattering of others that have adopted the "one church, multiple locations" motto. The multi-site phenomenon began in the mid-1990s, but the arrangement harkens back to the days when rural churches commonly shared a circuit preacher.

For The Blvd, "going multi-site" is the latest evolution in its long and dynamic history. Founded in 1921, it was the first black church in Memphis to belong to the Disciples of Christ denomination. It was named for its original address on Mississippi Boulevard in South Memphis. In 1984, the church relocated to Whitehaven and in 1992, it bought its current Midtown campus.

Today, The Blvd has 8,000 members on its rolls. With many parishioners living in and near the suburbs, the church hopes the Opera Memphis site, at 6745 Wolf River Parkway, will help it better accommodate current members and expand.

A church staffer will drive Thomas to both services each Sunday to allow him to regroup between sermons. The Blvd East can accommodate 400 worshipers and will have a smaller nursery and musical ensemble than the Midtown location, but the two services will have as much continuity as possible, explained Pitts.

For now, the church will only occupy the Opera Memphis space on Sundays, but it hopes to add programs as the congregation grows.

Michael Ching, artistic and general director of Opera Memphis, said that The Blvd East was a perfect pairing.

"We are generally not busy on Sunday morning and having Mississippi Boulevard in the facility will not interfere with afternoon ensemble rehearsals, nor Saturday rehearsals and occasional special events," said Ching.

"Opera Memphis has a strong and consistent track record of reaching out to the entire community," he added, "so we are hopeful that once things are going to their liking, that we can engage them in some interesting collaborations, further deepening the bonds of music and the spirit."

-- *Cathryn Stout: 529-2320*